

Submission: Objecting to Commercial Facilities in Gardens of Stone - Emphasis on Sustainable Alternatives

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RE: Gardens of Stone Multi-Day Walk - Notice of Intention to Grant a Lease

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposal to grant a lease to Wild Bush Luxury Experience Pty Ltd for developing commercial bush camps within the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area. I am writing to you today as an outdoor enthusiast who is deeply concerned about the potential impacts of this project on this precious natural resource.

Imagine the hushed murmur of ancient forests, the sun dappling a pristine alpine meadow, the salty spray of waves crashing against untouched shores. These are the breathtaking jewels of Australia's wild heart, our national parks and wilderness areas, sanctuaries where nature reigns supreme.

The Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area, established just in May 2022, is one such gem and was a longstanding priority for addition to the national parks estate due to its exceptional conservation values (unique geological features, threatened species, cultural heritage). This relatively new protected area boasts globally significant geological heritage, including the Newnes Plateau, the highest elevation sandstone plateau in the Blue Mountains. The area also holds immense cultural significance to the Wiradjuri People, with many recorded cultural heritage sites. Furthermore, the Gardens of Stone serves as a critical habitat for over 80 rare and threatened species.

But beneath this idyllic facade, shadows stir. The proposed development project for the Gardens of Stone threatens to carve scars into this irreplaceable landscape, eroding its very essence.

Objections

1. Public Land, Private Profit:

The Gardens of Stone is part of NSW's national park estate, public land set aside for all citizens to enjoy. Granting a commercial lease for profit-generating facilities, masquerading as "luxury ecotourism," undermines this core principle.

2. Accessibility and Affordability:

The proposal claims to increase accessibility but overlooks affordability. Wild Bush Luxury's existing tours suggest their services may be priced out of reach for many Australians. Public parks should offer experiences accessible to everyone, not just those with high disposable income.

3. Equal Opportunity and Camaraderie:

Public campgrounds foster a sense of community and shared experience among all users, regardless of socioeconomic background. Introducing exclusive, high-end facilities creates a division between "haves" and "have-nots," particularly for families or budget-conscious travellers who may be priced out of these experiences. National parks should strive to be inclusive spaces that promote connection with nature for everyone.

4. Environmental Impact:

The reserve protects at least 16 threatened ecological communities, rare groupings of plants and animals, including elevated swamps, box gum woodlands, Wolgan snow gum and tablelands grassy forest. More than 80 rare and threatened species make their homes here, including koalas, spotted-tail quolls, regent honeyeaters and Blue Mountains water skinks.

While the proposal mentions low-impact design, any development carries risks to the natural environment. Studies show luxury ecotourism projects can lead to a significant decline in biodiversity within sensitive areas. Furthermore, the disposal of greywater from cabins in these rocky locations raises concerns about potential pollution of pristine Carne Creek, a vital waterway within the Gardens of Stone. Public parks should prioritise conservation over commercial gain.

The proposed development sites are located on sensitive pagoda landforms, which are globally rare and hold significant cultural heritage. Development in these areas would cause irreparable damage. Public land should be protected, not exploited for profit-generating facilities that risk destroying these irreplaceable geological wonders.

5. Light Pollution:

Adding to the ecological concerns, luxury facilities often necessitate extensive artificial lighting. This light pollution disrupts the natural cycles of nocturnal wildlife, impacting

their feeding, breeding, and navigation patterns. Research suggests light pollution can be harmful to nocturnal birds and mammals like owls, possums, and bats. Furthermore, the glow from such lighting diminishes the experience of stargazing, a quintessential aspect of appreciating the natural beauty and serenity of the Gardens of Stone.

6. Long-Term Management:

The long-term management of these commercial facilities also raises concerns. Constructing and maintaining these structures will undoubtedly place additional burdens on already stretched park staff and resources. Will the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) have the capacity to effectively monitor the environmental impact of the development and ensure guest compliance with park regulations within these new commercial zones?

7. Precedence:

Approving this proposal for the Gardens of Stone sets a concerning precedent. Approving this proposal for the Gardens of Stone sets a concerning precedent. Prioritising cabin locations over the walker experience, like the proposed six-kilometer diversion loop, disregards the needs of park users. Additionally, permitting development in such visually prominent locations opens the door for similar commercialisation efforts in other pristine areas, putting other cliff tops and virgin landscapes at risk.

If luxury development is permitted here, it opens the door for similar commercialisation efforts in other protected areas across NSW and Australia, like the proposed development of a luxury walking track in Queensland's Cooloola Great Walk or the Falls to Hotham development in Victoria. This could lead to a gradual erosion of the very essence of national parks: the preservation of wild landscapes for public enjoyment and ecological health.

The Allure of Luxury Ecotourism – A Hidden Cost

Luxury ecotourism's promise of comfort in pristine landscapes masks a destructive reality. Previous proposals like the Lost City adventure park were rejected due to their impact on these very same pagoda landscapes. Approving cabins would contradict these past decisions that prioritised conservation. Construction disrupts ecosystems, while exclusivity restricts access for the average citizen. We must prioritise the park's natural beauty and public purpose over private profit.

So, What's the Solution?

The solution isn't to turn our backs on the economic opportunities' ecotourism can offer. Sustainable alternatives exist, flourishing outside protected areas. Imagine

charming villages and towns on the fringes of wilderness, thriving on responsible tourism ventures that support local communities and minimise environmental impact.

Consider locally owned guesthouses, eco-conscious lodges nestled at the edge of nature's tapestry, and guided explorations led by knowledgeable locals. These options allow us to reap the benefits of tourism while safeguarding the very wilderness that attracts visitors in the first place.

Embracing Responsible Tourism

There are countless opportunities for enjoying nature and outdoor recreation outside of national parks and reserves. Exploring local trails, camping in designated areas, or visiting regional parks can offer enriching experiences while avoiding the potential downsides of development within protected areas.

Focusing on sustainable tourism initiatives in towns and areas adjacent to national parks can diversify local economies and reduce reliance on park-based activities. This can create a more robust and resilient economic system while simultaneously protecting wild landscapes.

Conclusion

The Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area should remain a place where all Australians can experience the beauty of nature on an equal footing. The proposed development prioritises commercial interests over public access and enjoyment. I urge you to reject the lease proposal and explore alternative solutions that uphold the park's public purpose and environmental integrity.

The Gardens of Stone proposal is just one example of a disturbing trend we're seeing across Australia. From Queensland's Cooloola Great Walk to Tasmania's Halls-Malbena development, numerous National Parks face the threat of commercialisation. This national trend highlights the urgent need for stronger protections to ensure our National Parks are preserved for all Australians to experience nature, not exploited for private gain.

Protecting our wild places for future generations doesn't have to come at the expense of economic opportunities. We can achieve a balance by supporting sustainable ventures and responsible tourism practices outside of national parks. Let's keep the Gardens of Stone wild and ensure future generations inherit a planet with breathtaking landscapes and thriving ecosystems.

Thank you for considering my submission.